

Home · Articles · Cover Story · Cover Story · Cover Story: Book of a Lifetime

Cover Story: Book of a Lifetime

Tim and Donna Lucas' self-published magnum opus finally sees the light of day

BY JASON GARGANO · OCTOBER 24TH, 2007 · COVER STORY

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Tim Lucas is a dedicated man. He's also a meticulous, uniquely incisive autodidact, a revered figure in certain circles who lives an almost monastic life in pursuit of his obsessions.

Back From The Dead

In an age when publishers of every stripe are questioning the future of the printed word, Lucas and his wife Donna have just published their lavishly designed, exhaustively detailed magnum opus, *Mario Bava: All the Colors of the Dark*.

Yes, the local writer's biography on the cult Italian horror director has finally seen the light of day some 30 years after its inception. The result is a 12-pound, 1,128-page, glossy full-color love letter to a director whose esoteric career Lucas has made it his mission to celebrate.

Sean Hughes

Back From The Dead

And who better to do so? Lucas' name carries a special place in the passionate hearts of horror and fantasy movie buffs everywhere. He and Donna have self-published the respected magazine *Video Watchdog* out of their Price Hill home for 17 years. And now they've done the same with *All the Colors of the Dark*, a life's work that some are calling one of the best movie books ever committed to page.

Hyperbole? Not so fast.

None other than filmmaker and longtime *Video Watchdog* subscriber Martin Scorsese has given the author his seal of approval. Scorsese, writing in the book's introduction, says, "Tim Lucas has devoted himself to getting the word out about Bava's greatness, to making sure his films are preserved and available on tape and DVD. This book is the pinnacle of his efforts. It deserves a place on the bookshelves of all serious film lovers."

Joe Dante -- filmmaker, onetime movie critic and fellow Bava aficionado -- concurs.

"I'll say it flatly: There has never been *anything* like Tim's book published about any film artist, past or present," Dante declares via e-mail. "The wealth of detail, the garage-door size, the lavish illustrations -- it's all simply stunning."

Film critic and author D.K. Holm piles on still more praise in a recent profile of Lucas for the popular film buff blog GreenCine Daily: "Besides the life and career of Bava himself, the book also features essays on the theory and appeal of horror films, a history of Italian cinema, essays on cinematography, special effects, movie poster art and advertising and biographies of most of the key personnel associated with Bava's career, including Barbara Steele. It is perhaps one of the most interesting, dedicated, thoroughly-researched books ever published."

Come again? Such effusive approbation for a do-it-yourself, husband-and-wife publishing team based on Cincinnati's West Side? Of course, *CityBeat* has been touting the duo's efforts for some time now, first spotlighting their still-vital magazine six years ago ("Fantastic Voyage," issue of July 12, 2001).

All the Colors of the Dark is the culmination of endless hours of work, a physical monument to a project that has engulfed Tim and Donna Lucas' entire adult lives.

Finding a voice

It's an unseasonably warm Sunday evening in early October as I sit on a couch in the Lucases' Price Hill home. The couple has lived and worked in this modest, two-story house since they married as teenagers more than 30 years ago.

It's an unlikely headquarters for the publishers of a major film book and an esteemed movie magazine -- Tim writes and edits, and Donna designs and takes care of the business end.

Tim, who's a youthful-looking 51, opens a long, wide-ranging conversation with a look back to his childhood, a trying period that clearly informed his loner, movie-mad tendencies.

"Between the ages of 4 and 8, I was raised by other families," he says. "My mother had a night job, and so she got people to care for me through the week. She would come and pick me up and we would go to a drive-in on Saturday night and then she would take me to whoever was taking care of me on Sunday. So the drive-in became my surrogate home, so to speak. It's where I transplanted my feelings of home. We would go to see things that would interest me, things like *King Kong vs. Godzilla* or *The Raven*."

It wasn't long before he was immersing himself in the world of books and fanzines and horror movie magazines like *Castle of Frankenstein*, a publication where the aforementioned Dante would write about his admiration for Bava's largely neglected work. It was Lucas' first exposure to a man whose films would soon become his own 30-year obsession.

If *Castle of Frankenstein* piqued Lucas' burgeoning interest in the macabre, *Cinefantastique* sealed the deal.



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Founded in 1967 as a mimeographed fanzine, *Cinefantastique* was an inspiration to what Lucas would eventually do with his own *Video Watchdog* magazine: an editorial content-heavy glossy that covers genre films with an articulate, meticulous, borderline scholarly approach.

"I went to Kidd's Bookstore downtown one day in 1971," Lucas says of his first memories of *Cinefantastique*. "The owner of the store noticed the stuff I was buying and said, 'Well, if you're interested in this you really ought to check out this magazine over here.' And I went and picked it up, and that's what really changed my life, because this was a magazine that took the art of criticism about the sort of films that interested me to a level even beyond what *Castle of Frankenstein* had been doing."

"I bought this issue, and I went to lunch with a friend of mine. When we were sitting in this Frisch's I just kept pulling this magazine out of the bag and looking at it. He said, 'You really seem to like that magazine. Maybe you should try writing for them.' So that's what I did. I sat down with my typewriter and wrote two short reviews and one long review."

The long piece turned out to be a critique of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, which a then-14-year-old Lucas covered for his Norwood High School newspaper. (*Cinefantastique* turned down the review -- they already assigned it to another writer -- but accepted one of the shorter pieces.)

"I actually went with my journalism teacher from school," he says, laughing at the memory. "So I wrote about that movie and it turned out to be a traumatic evening because that same night my best friend committed suicide. I had just gotten word of this before my teacher had arrived to pick me up. I didn't know if it was true or not."

"My mother said, 'Well, look, your ride is here. You go on to the movie. I'll find out more about it.' And so not really wanting to go but having been told to go, I went and saw this assault on the senses all the time wondering whether my best friend was alive or dead. And, you know, he did die."

Within a few months, still traumatized by the unexpected death of his friend, Lucas dropped out of school. He moved into a commune-like house with an older friend who shared his love of fanzines that catered to obscure music and movies. Together they wrote for such local publications as *The Queen's Jester* and *The Rivertown Times*.

And, of course, Lucas became a regular contributor to *Cinefantastique* as well as *Video Times* (where "Video Watchdog" debuted as a monthly piece, one of the first such columns to cover the burgeoning video market).

Though still in his teens, it was clear Lucas had found his calling.

"With the proliferation of movies available on home video, there arose a need for someplace to go to learn about the various versions being offered," Dante says. "Tim's pre-*Watchdog* writings pioneered this sort of approach, which was then consolidated into the magazine. Anyone who cares in detail about movies loves *Video Watchdog*."

Discovering Bava

Mario Bava was born in San Remo, Italy, in 1914. The son of a sculptor, inventor and photographer, he found work in the Italian film industry as cameraman in the 1930s.

Like his father, he was a highly skilled technician and photographer, interests that would become his trademark and lifelong passion. (He contributed countless ingenious special effects shots to a host of films, many of which went uncredited.)

Bava made his directorial debut in 1960 with the landmark *Black Sunday*, a gothic black-and-white horror film rife with atmosphere and distinctive set design, attributes that would remain a staple of his work for years to come.

A series of little-seen but stylish, expressively colored films followed -- most recognizably *Black Sabbath*, *Kill Baby...Kill!* and *Danger: Diabolik* -- many of which were trimmed, dubbed and re-titled upon their American releases. It didn't help that the modest Bava was dismissive of his own work, even when his films began to be re-evaluated later in his career (he died in 1980).

"In the mid-'60s I tried to turn on all my friends to Bava's films, which, being dubbed and luridly promoted, were marginalized as drive-in and grindhouse fodder and consequently very hard to track down theatrically," Dante says. "His was a vision completely new and original, with a dazzling pictorial style. I talked him up as much as I could in the pages of *Castle of Frankenstein* magazine, where a lot of maturing film buffs were being exposed to critical thinking about the same genre films they had grown up seeing spoofed in the general run of 'monster' magazines. When you learn exactly *how* Bava accomplished his illusions despite meager circumstances, his brilliance only grows. And the use of light, both natural and unnatural, is just astonishing. He even makes death look beautiful."

Dante's enthusiasm was contagious for a young cinephile like Lucas, who was intent on giving Bava his due alongside filmmakers like fellow Italian Federico Fellini.

"When books began to be published about the horror genre, in particular Carlos Clarens' *Illustrated History of the Horror Film*, people began to take the view that *Black Sunday*, his first movie, was really the only worthwhile one, that his work started to dip down into obscurity and sleaze and sadism," Lucas says in his calm, professorial tone while sitting amid a bevy of music and movie posters that line the walls of his living room. "But Joe (Dante) was always a big cheerleader for Bava's movies. In fact, when *Twitch of the Death Nerve* came out, he took the amazingly brave stance of saying that it had the greatest ending of any movie since *Citizen Kane*."

If Dante -- who would go on to direct such Hollywood fare as *Grenlins* and *Small Soldiers* and who has recently optioned a script written by Lucas -- was an early champion, Lucas has become the unquestioned keeper of Bava's legacy.

"Bava had this really exploitative title slapped on his work of art," Lucas says of a man he found to be a kindred spirit. "There was a sense of wanting to correct that injustice to find out what it was about Bava (that made him shun the spotlight). You couldn't find anything about him. And when you did find references to him, they were not positive, and in many cases the people who were putting him down really had no idea what he'd done."

"These movies in English hide under such a plethora of repulsive titles that people just turn themselves off before they look at them. But they're surprisingly literary and metaphysical and artistic because I think the Italian film community, more than the American community or any other, had such a thorough grounding in other artistic disciplines like sculpture and painting and ballet and opera. You can actually see a distillation of all these things in these films."

It's a confluence Lucas describes throughout his impressively researched, elegantly written opus.

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Bava's brilliance is also on display via a flurry of recent DVD releases. The majority of the director's filmography is now available -- including the release of *The Mario Bava Collection: Volume Two* this week -- many of which feature astute, highly informative audio commentary from Lucas.

The long road to self-publication

Amid years of false starts, the grind of putting out a monthly magazine and delays for other projects -- Lucas has also published two novels -- *Mario Bava: All the Colors of the Dark* finally arrived at the Lucases' front door from its China printer in August, a monumental moment they videotaped and documented on their Bava Book Update blog (www.bavabook.blogspot.com).

It's been a long, often arduous road to self-publish a book of this magnitude -- a steep price (both literally and metaphorically) they were willing to pay to ensure quality control. They started taking orders for the book back in 2001 (current list price is \$260).

Tim finished the majority of the text in 2003, 28 years after he started the initial research and writing. And Donna has spent all of her free time over the last four years designing the massive undertaking in PageMaker, an alarmingly impressive feat given the enormous amount of images collected in the book -- everything from Bava's family photos to movie stills to promotional paraphernalia to rare movie posters to production shots.

"It was like beating my head against a wall for four years," Donna says in a rapid-fire voice that's the polar opposite to that of her more reserved husband and working partner. "It was continual problem-solving on how to get the graphics up there, how to re-create what it's really going to be like in print. I had to go through so many different printer problems, trying to organize it between issues of *Video Watchdog*, not being able to go anywhere or do anything with the family."

Tim agrees that it was a stressful situation.

"Very often there were times where I'd stay up all night hoping to have an hour with her or something before bedtime," he says. "And she would just be upstairs wrestling with a problem, and I could feel her psychic energy just burning through the ceiling."

More than anything, Donna feels relief in having finished a project that's been a part of their entire adult lives.

"I've been promising this for so long," she says. "I hope it lives up to readers' expectations. I feel more humble about it than anything. I hope we've been able to do what we've been saying we've been able to do all these years. We're just happy we've lived long enough to share this with people. We feel like we were basically servants to do it."

And what would Bava think of all this fuss over his life and work, which in turn has become the Lucas's life and work?

"He would think we were idiots," Tim says. "But he would be inwardly very happy." ©

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